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SUBJECT: Zambian Government(GRZ) bans radio phone-in political programs

¶11. SUMMARY: Just as Zambia prepares for an October 30, 2008 presidential election, parties are jockeying for any media advantages they can get, the GRZ banned radio stations from conducting live phone-in programs. The ban, citing unbalanced and unfair coverage of political parties, is supposed to last through the entire election season. The move has thus far met with defiance from radio stations and criticism from professional media bodies. The GRZ implemented the ban soon after private radio station, Q FM, had two consecutive programs featuring ruling party members who came under heavy criticism by callers. END SUMMARY

¶12. In a statement on Friday, September 19, 2008 [but dated September 12, 2008] Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Services permanent secretary Emmanuel Nyirenda directed all commercial and community radio stations to stop airing phone-in programs during the election period. Nyirenda observed that some radio stations had political programs which provided unbalanced and unfair coverage of political parties. He stated that stations needed to use special technology which would allow for calls to be screened. Few, if any, stations in Zambia would be able to purchase such equipment anytime soon.

¶13. The government ban has been perceived as an attempt to undermine media freedom and freedom of expression of citizens. The directive is seen as an attempt to quell urban support for opposition political parties, particularly the Patriotic Front (PF) and United Party for National Development (UPND). Featuring PF and UPND opposition leaders on live phone-in programs has previously been a fairly typical tactic to launch attacks on the ruling party. Clearly the ruling MMD party sees these programs as a legitimate threat.

¶14. Q FM and others have defied the ban, vowing to carry on with their popular phone-in programs. Q FM Managing director Asan Nyama said the station would not be intimidated by the government. On September 23, 2008, media associations spoke out against the ban in a communiqu calling upon radio stations to ignore the government directive and continue normal programming. The communiqu, which was signed by seven local media bodies, said "the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Services must desist from issuing statements that threaten to undermine media freedom and freedom of expression of citizens."

¶15. Comment. The ban seems pointed directly at Lusaka-based Q FM, which has stood out in providing live coverage of political events in Zambia. In the run-up to the 2006 general elections, the station was threatened by government police while broadcasting live during polling. With the current collective stand to ignore the government ban, it will be interesting to see what measures the government will take against QerringQ radio stations as the presidential by-election draws closer. The GRZ has over the years exercised intolerance with community radio stations countrywide for featuring opposition political parties. End comment.

KOPLOVSKY